

A Perspective on Effective Leadership

Gen John L. Piotrowski

I'm honored to have this opportunity to set to paper a few words that attempt to capture what has been assimilated on effective leadership in nearly 38 years of Air Force service, with more than 20 years in command positions. These thoughts encompass perspectives shaped from the vantage point of airman basic to general, as well as from group commander to commander in chief (CINC).

The word *leadership* is defined within itself. The suffix *ship* holds the meanings (according to Webster) of state, condition, quality, dignity, art, and skill. Hence leadership is the sum of all these factors that describe the leader's personality in total. In a simpler context, it is the measure of a leader's ability to execute difficult tasks under adverse conditions—for example, to repair, load, and ready a wing of aircraft for combat in the dead of an arctic winter or the heat of a Middle East summer. The quality of leadership at all levels makes an enormous difference in the eventual outcome of any undertaking. This article describes several ways for leaders, commanders, or supervisors to hone the quality, art, and skill of their leadership.

I am absolutely convinced that the quality of leadership in any enterprise—be it military, civil, or commercial—shapes and determines the outcome more than any other factor. This conviction is based on my experience looking up at my many commanders, across at peers at every level of command, and down through several levels from the vantage point of wing commander through CINC. Napoléon had it right when he proclaimed, “There are no bad regiments, only bad colonels.” One downside of this belief is that when your enterprise is experiencing problems, the first place you must search for discovery of the problem is your own leadership and subsequently that of your subordinate commanders and supervisors. Remember, and remember well, when problems occur and continue, look first to your leadership and then on down the line before you look elsewhere to solve the problems or to place the blame.

Brilliant leaders of the past, philosophers, and experience have led me to the conviction that the two most important prerequisites of sustained quality leadership are courage and

credibility. The first is an innate quality; the second can and must be earned as the result of hard work. With regard to courage, the response of Gen George C. Marshall to the question “What qualities were you looking for when you selected the great leaders of World War II, the Eisenhowers and the Bradleys?” is most instructive. General Marshall responded, “Courage; courage is the most important characteristic of leadership because all others depend on it—not the courage to take out the machine gun or charge the hill, but the courage to do what is right!” And you will find, as you tread through the minefields of command, that there will be times when temptations of the easy path are far more appealing than doing what is right. Resist the temptation and do what is right! Lt Gen John P. Flynn, the highest-ranking officer held as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, lectured on his approach, which was as follows: “Armed with all the facts I can muster, I go into isolation and determine which course of action is right and which is wrong—then I pursue with vigor what is right and resist what is wrong with all my might.”

As mentioned earlier, your credibility is one of the signal requisites for you to be successful as a leader in any enterprise. The following subparagraphs provide a set of five tenets for earning and maintaining credibility. First, allow me to relate how I came to embrace these guides. I had been selected for my first command (the 40th Tactical Group at Aviano, Italy) as a young colonel with six months in grade. The 40th was at that time a man-eater, the four previous commanders having been relieved within a few months of assuming command. The man I was replacing had lasted six months, and the most recent Air Force inspector general (AF/IG) inspection had rated the unit the worst in the United States Air Force. En route to Aviano, I was instructed to stop by Headquarters United States Air Force Europe (Hq USAFE) to meet with the CINC, Gen David C. Jones, and his deputy chiefs of staff one-on-one. His deputy chief of staff, operations, was a newly promoted brigadier general (select), still wearing his eagles. I'd never met the man before, but he made a profound and lasting impression in the few words of advice he offered. He held up his hand and counted off his fingers as he spoke:

First, know your job better than any one else; otherwise you'll be swept away by the first strong wind. Second, know by heart the make-or-break-pass/fail items and manage those above all others. Third, go where the action is; don't let any important or high-risk activity go forward without your review and oversight. Fourth, take

Gen John L. Piotrowski, USAF, retired, began his Air Force career as an enlisted man. He served as vice chief of staff, United States Air Force, and as commander in chief, North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Space Command.

good care of your people and they will take care of you. Lastly, set high standards for yourself and your organization—if you don't, the iconoclasts will set the standards and you'll have enormous difficulty regaining control.

Upon leaving his office, I wrote down these five cryptic points and placed them in big letters under the glass on my desk where I would be easily reminded of them daily.

There are many lists and mantras for achieving success, and although most contain many more items and are more detailed, these five work and are easy to remember. The following subparagraphs put some more meat on the outline.

1. *Know your job better than anyone else.* This is a tall order, especially if you've just arrived and completed the change-of-command ceremony. However, in order to lead effectively, you must fully understand the unit's mission and all of the pertinent guidance that supports it. Immediately immerse yourself in the appropriate documents, such as the AF Series 23 regulation that established the unit; appropriate war plans and supporting documents; the latest operational and management inspections; recent staff assistant visit reports; and so on. Getting up to speed quickly requires burning the midnight and weekend oil, but it pays big dividends and not only prepares you to lead effectively and earn immediate credibility points for your mission savvy, but it better prepares you to deflect all the half-baked ideas the staff has been holding to try on the new commander. Moreover, of the several units that I have been sent to command, some were doing things well, others were not—but most were doing the wrong things based on mission directives.

2. *Know the make-or-break-pass/fail items and manage those above all others.* This makes enormous sense, but so many commanders, especially newly appointed ones, get lost in the day-to-day minutiae. In every enterprise there are elements of the operation that are critical to success and/or survival. I don't know what they might be for your unit, but I can assure you that I knew what they were for mine; and I knew, day-to-day, what our ability was to perform in those areas. Said another way, you should never be surprised by an IG write-up in a pass/fail item. Some examples for operational units could be nuclear security, communications security (COMSEC), operations security (OPSEC), conventional and nuclear weapons load-out time, weapons delivery scores, and so on. Missile, reconnaissance, acquisition, support, and other kinds of organizations will have their own unique make-or-break criteria—these criteria will all hinge on the critical aspects of performing their respective missions. It's hard to believe, but one of the finest USAFE wings busted an operational readiness inspection (ORI) because the commander held for three hours in the command post the IG message directing a conventional weapons load-out and mission. He held the message release to operations, maintenance, security, and so on, while studying it for "subtle indicators" in mission execution—unfortunately, the bomb dump didn't get

the word to prepare the munitions until it was too late to make the load-out criteria.

3. *Go where the action is.* There's an old bromide which goes as follows: "There's nothing like the farmer's footsteps to make the crops grow." The same is true of the commander's footsteps with regard to mission performance and accomplishment. Your presence throughout your command is the best and perhaps the only way for you to get to know your personnel, what they do, and how they do it. Equally important, people are more open on their own turf; they are more likely to tell you what you need to hear and know—one-on-one or many-on-one—in the comfort of their surroundings than in a staff meeting with others present or in your office. One excellent technique is to "Columbo" them to exhaustion. After the icebreaker questions of where are you from, how long have you been in this assignment, how's the family, and so on, ask questions about what they do; how they do it; and do they have the tools, technical materials, and manning to get the job done under the most demanding tasking expected. If you're trying to get them to change procedures or do things differently, you can use the question process to lead them to find the right solution and then praise them for their great idea. And while you are getting hands-on acquainted with the command's people, facilities, and process, you are earning credibility and developing the knowledge it takes to lead effectively. You're developing a willing and believing followership—an essential ingredient for success. You have to keep going back again and again; each visit speaking very loudly that those people and that function are important to you and to the mission. Equally important, they will tell you more and more what you need to know, and you'll earn more and more credibility. One more point: Every day new personnel are assigned to your command, while others depart. It's not enough for the newcomers to hear about your last visit a week, a month, or a year ago. Each new person changes the chemistry of his or her section and your command—you need to be hands-on with them—you need credibility with them! As a word of caution, one weakness we all have is the inclination to go where we feel most comfortable. For a flying wing commander, that place is likely a flying squadron much like the ones he or she spent the majority of his or her career in. Unfortunately, that's the place least likely to need the commander's attention—more likely, the trouble areas are supply, security police, aerospace ground equipment, the flight line at night, or the mobility section. My admonishment to you is to go everywhere and go often, but go most often to where your presence and guidance are most needed. Moreover, there is an additional benefit; your key staff and subordinate commanders will follow your lead. In the words of Mark Twain, "It's hard to ignore a good example."

And while you're practicing "walkabout" leadership, be enthusiastic! As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nothing great is ever achieved without enthusiasm." I would go one further and say *nothing* is ever achieved without enthusi-

asm. Have you ever seen an athletic team take the field without gusto? If you did, they lost. As the leader you must set the tone of your command; no one else can do it for you—enthusiasm, commitment, and a can-do attitude are infectious. Your staff and subordinates throughout your command will reflect your attitude. Your bearing and your energy level are equally important. I had the pleasure of escorting the late senator John Stennis (D-Miss.) from the flight line at Keesler Air Force Base (AFB), Mississippi, to a political rally approximately two miles distant. It was late in the evening, and the senator looked tired, bordering on exhaustion; he seemed to have trouble walking and getting into the car and fell asleep in the ensuing five-minute ride. Getting out of the car, he looked no better; however, in the few short steps to the rally hall door, a transformation took place—the senator was erect, energetic, vibrant—his voice boomed out as he greeted the assembly, and he moved quickly and aggressively shaking all hands. He won the election. As the commander, you need to project an energetic, vibrant, confident image at all times—you need to be up for every occasion.

4. *Take care of your people.* Napoléon said, “Morale is to things as three is to one.” Perhaps he understated the ratio, but he was right on the importance of morale. Personal recognition, awards, decorations, and such are important elements of taking care of our people. Those programs are, by and large, institutionalized and exist at all levels within the Air Force. While these programs are very important, they touch only a small number of personnel; therefore, I strongly believe and recommend that you augment them with programs that touch every unit member often. Caring about and for your people should come naturally, but unfortunately it doesn’t—you *have to work at it daily*—and as mentioned earlier, the make-up and chemistry of your personnel are changing continuously. Every day there are new people arriving who will affect the unit’s ability to deploy smoothly, conduct effective combat operations, and operate safely; and you haven’t touched them. They have not experienced any of the things you have done for your people—what exists when they arrive on station is the starting point for them.

The easiest way to take care of the command’s personnel is to have personal and favorable contact with them; find out where there are shortages or problems and then make sure they get corrected. This is achieved to a large degree with a hands-on, walkabout leadership style.

However, while getting around is essential, it isn’t sufficient. It may take a long time for you to meet someone who could be even more positive or less negative for having met the commander. As commander of the 40th Tactical Group and the 552d AWACS Wing, I personally met weekly with every new arrival, the officers, top three, and enlisted in separate groups. I shook everyone’s hand and gave each group a few words on the mission, telling them how important they were because they were the ones making it happen, offering assistance for special needs,

and sharing the thought that my primary responsibility was to make sure they had the training, tools, and guidance to do their job correctly, effectively, and safely. It takes time, but it may be the only opportunity for a long time to shape the attitudes of a large percentage of the unit’s personnel—you can also get an early impression of where there may be problems.

The things a commander can do for his or her people are limited, but when presented with an opportunity, don’t blow it because you’re too busy or because it’s just a little thing—too small to matter. One of the easiest ways to demonstrate caring for your personnel is to fix things that are broken. Don’t ever pass up an opportunity to fix something that’s easily fixed; for example, broken pool sticks in the recreation center or the dormitories, a broken street-light, or a broken bus-stop bench. To help generate things to fix and a way to get the word back to wing personnel that things were being fixed, I created a “Commander’s Gram.” The Commander’s Gram consisted of a lined sheet of paper with the aforementioned title and the salutation, Dear Colonel “Pete,” “I want to bring the following to your attention,” followed by a page of lines and ending with a place for signature and a box to check for anonymous. Attractive Commander’s Gram boxes were posted at several convenient locations. Each gram box consisted of a locked mailbox with an open slot to hold a generous supply of blank forms. The senior enlisted advisor had the only key to the boxes and was the official collector. All gram responses were posted on bulletin boards—the signed ones with the salutation, Dear Sergeant Smith, to mask the author or Dear Anonymous as appropriate. Signed grams also received a personal response. The idea of the Dear Sergeant Smith salutation on signed grams was to let the base personnel know that there were many correspondents willing to sign their complaints. It worked, even though from time to time, when participation waned, I salted the system with things I noted that needed to be fixed—after all, the system was open to everyone. A word of advice: if you implement such a system, read all the letters yourself, direct the corrective action, and sign all the responses. At first I tried letting the responsible agency prepare the response—wrong! The response to the broken pool stick from the services commander was “When you stop breaking them, we’ll start fixing them. . . .” My response was “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. When you return to the dorm this evening you will find that all the pool sticks have been professionally repaired and additional ones provided. In addition, each first sergeant has been furnished a repair kit to ensure the sticks remain serviceable.”

5. *Set high standards for yourself and your unit.* If you have children, you’ve learned that high standards are not a product of good genes; rather they are acquired—sometimes painfully. The same applies to standards of performance, appearance, discipline, building maintenance, and everything else. Keep foremost in your mind that high stan-

dards in every facet of appearance and performance are not goals in and of themselves—they are critically important primarily because they directly and positively impact the self-esteem and productivity of our personnel, hence the mission. While standards of performance and appearance go hand in hand, it is important to give proper balance between the two. With regard to in-house performance standards, it is often difficult to determine what is an achievable and reasonable standard. Here I suggest you find what the best performance is in a comparable unit and set your goals just a touch higher. However, don't be unreasonable—there is not, for example, a significant difference between serving a finance center customer in five minutes or four minutes—there *is* between 15 and five. It is equally important to note that as things slip into disrepair or unsightliness, they become the norm; we get used to them and lose any inclination to fix them. An example of this was the water fountain just outside the command section of Ninth Air Force at the time of my arrival. It was horribly rusted, hanging askew, and the wall around it and the carpet under it were badly stained from past leaks. Yet no one seemed to notice—that's just the way things were.

The best thing you have going for you as a new commander is a set of fresh eyes that are not yet accustomed to the way things are and have been. Immediately after learning your mission to the 99th percentile, write down everything that needs to be fixed, spruced up, painted, and so on, as you're practicing walkabout leadership. Not everything has to be fixed immediately, but if you don't write it down, the problems will soon become "the way things are" to you too. On the other hand, have you ever had the experience of going around your area of responsibility to prepare for a distinguished visitor and notice that you were seeing things differently—that what appeared to meet standards yesterday fell short today? It may sound silly, even sophomoric, but I used to drive around the base on weekends with the perspective that I was preparing for a visit by the major command (MAJCOM) commander—things always looked different, not as good as before—often in need of fixing. It's important to keep in mind that you are making things better for the good of your people, and it is a fact that an attractive base and a neat, clean, and attractive workplace have a dramatic and positive effect on the self-esteem and productivity of the workforce. Another word of caution: Air Force personnel are bright, sophisticated, and intolerant of the "look good for the inspector or boss" syndrome. The high standards you set are for every day because of their positive impact, not just for special occasions. Very little more than emptying the wastebaskets should be required for special visitors.

The following tips do not conveniently fall into one of the five-finger topics, but nonetheless are very useful.

1. *Selecting subordinate commanders and supervisors.* Perhaps the greatest advice Gen William L. Creech gave me as he sent me off to command Ninth Air Force was,

"Spend at least 90 percent of your time picking your subordinate commanders; the 8 or 9 percent you have left will be sufficient to handle all the rest of your job, because you won't have many problems." He was absolutely right. To the contrary, one of my greatest disappointments was when a superstar wing commander (promoted to brigadier general well ahead of his contemporaries) selected a person, who could be generously described as barely capable, to command one of the wing's operational F-4 squadrons. When I called the wing commander about his selection, his response was, "It was his turn." There is no such thing as his or her turn when selecting people to put in tough, demanding jobs, especially that of commander—pick only the best that you believe are capable of stepping up! To do otherwise is courting disaster—and will likely lead to having to replace that person shortly.

2. *Understanding your responsibilities and priorities.* How many times have we heard some form of "but, if I relieve 'Charlie,' it will hurt his career." First, your principal responsibilities are not to an individual; rather, they are to the unit as a whole, mission accomplishment, and to the hundreds or perhaps thousands of people who are performing in outstanding fashion and carrying "Charlie." Second, there are two truths about poor performers you must keep in mind: (a) no matter how quickly you relieve the "Charlies" who are not doing their jobs, you should have done it earlier, and (b) everyone associated with "Charlie" knows he's not doing the job and wondering why you're letting him drag down the unit.

This is not to say you don't have a responsibility to train and tutor your subordinate commanders and supervisors; the issue is, have you done enough to realize it's a lost cause and time to make a change when you're not achieving the desired results? My experience has convinced me that we usually put it off too long!

3. *Praise on Monday, fire on Friday.* The reason should be obvious—the high that comes from praise early in the week has a positive effect on the unit for the remainder of the week. On the other hand, relieving a person at the close of business on Friday gives that person an opportunity to prepare for facing his or her fellows come Monday. Equally important, it gets that person out of the work area before he or she can tell their coworkers how they've been wronged.

4. *Handling adversity.* When serious problems arise involving an individual or individuals, you must act responsibly. Investigate thoroughly, document the investigation, and then armed with the facts and in isolation, after receiving legal/personnel counsel, decide what is right and have the courage to act. Often we lose the disinterested-person perspective that is critical in deciding the right course of action. An example of the wrong course is the flying wing commander who fails to take appropriate action against a pilot who has brought his professional competence into question. A classic case comes to mind of a wing commander who failed to take any corrective action on an F-16

instructor pilot (IP), resulting in the loss of four lives, one aircraft, and very nearly a second. Reasonable corrective action may have been to decertify the IP, schedule him for appropriate training, and upon completion of training and the recommendation of Standardization and Evaluation (Stan/Eval), schedule him for an IP-recertification check flight. This wing commander chose to blame the accident on an “act of God,” contrary to all the evidence and mishap board findings—it cost him his command and brought unnecessary attention on the IP, who had suffered a momentary, but costly, lapse of judgment. What should have been done initially was eventually accomplished by the new wing commander, and the soon-recertified IP was again flying with students, perhaps with a greater sense of responsibility. Remember, your responsibility is to the mission and to the people who make it happen. Even the best performers from time to time need help in the form of corrective action. Have the courage to do what is right.

5. *When dramatic changes are mandated, resist the temptation to fight them after the decision is taken on high. Instead, take care and shape the future for the best-possible outcome.* Two such mandates serve as examples: integration of the military in the late forties and integrating enlisted men and women in common dormitories in the mid eighties. I don’t mean to suggest that the two examples are on the same level. Clearly racial integration was seminal and had a major impact on the fabric of our society, whereas the latter already existed on college campuses and was readily accepted, in general, outside the military.

Whatever the issue, when a decision is taken by the president; secretary of defense; chief, Joint Chiefs of Staff; chief of staff, Air Force; or MAJCOM commander, your response must be the same: take a positive approach, advertise the benefits of the change, and shape the outcome by taking charge and leading all the way. To do otherwise will signal that those in higher headquarters don’t understand and have dumped on us again—this only makes your job more difficult, perhaps impossible.

6. *When a crisis occurs, do something.* Here I’m referring to something way out of the ordinary. For example, one Saturday morning at roughly 1300 hours, I was notified that a race riot was forming at the Aviano enlisted cantonment area. The movie *Shaft* had played at the base theater Friday evening and a small group of black enlisted personnel saw the opportunity to create severe racial tension, which they evidently saw to their advantage. For those too young to remember, *Shaft* had a “James Bond”-like plot with the lead played by Richard Roundtree, a Hollywood superstar who happened to be black. The late-night moviegoers returning to the supply and security police dormitories were struck with racial slurs spray-painted across the buildings and notes containing similar slurs slipped under the doors of their rooms. Needless to say, the young black airmen were hurt, angry, and frustrated—they wanted something done. Once the initial anger was put to rest (credibility and hands-on leadership made the difference

between severe confrontation and discussion), something had to be done that demonstrated our resolve to find the perpetrators and take appropriate action. What to do? What we did was call the security police, squadron commanders, and first sergeants and direct that all group personnel be fingerprinted following group recall, at which I explained what happened, what was being done, and called for patience and understanding. I was first in line to be fingerprinted at the headquarters squadron section. It worked; most people believed we had a plan—surprisingly the fingerprints did play a key role in the apprehension and conviction of the culprits.

The point is do something dramatic to buy time while you’re sorting out what to do in a crisis—all the better if the initial action helps in some way to ease the pain—and serendipitous if it proves ultimately to be the right course of action. Trust your gut instincts; they are most often correct.

7. *Create an environment for truth to flourish.* An old Turkish proverb advises, “The bearer of bad tidings should keep one foot in the stirrup.” In modern jargon we are admonished, “Don’t shoot the messenger.” There is an enormous belief at every level, in every enterprise, that what people do to survive is tell the boss what he or she wants to hear—not what he or she needs to hear! Nothing should be further from the truth—no pun intended. When people I associate with in civilian life find out that I was formerly a four-star general, they invariably get around to asking, in one form or another, “How did you get people to tell you what they believed to be true, instead of what you wanted to hear?” My answer was always, “With great difficulty!” You must force yourself to reward those who tell you the truth as they see it; you must encourage people to tell you what they believe rather than what you want to hear and thank them for it (even if it pains you); and you must create an environment where telling the commander the truth is commonplace! After all, if you don’t know what is happening in your wing, how can you do your job?

8. *Listening and talking.* It is a proven fact that you learn more from people when you’re listening to them than when you are talking at them. Practice the art of listening; it’s hard enough for an airman, sergeant, or lieutenant to muster the courage to talk frankly to the commander, let alone try to break in and say something that needs to be said when the commander is talking or lecturing. Enough said on listening—talking is another matter. *Effective* communication is the responsibility of the talker. When communicating one-on-one or one-on-many, the responsibility is yours. Be sure to take into consideration the sensitivities of the audience. Again, the understanding of sensitivities must be learned—you can see the world only through eyes of your experiences and upbringing.

There is no greater reward than successful command at the squadron and wing level where you have the privilege and pleasure of working daily with real people who make it all happen! While the rewards are high, so too are the demands, the hours, and the personal commitment. When it

was all over for me and I reflected back, my only regret was in not giving more! Command is not for the timid, the lame, or those protective of their own time. In the words of General Dixon to the newly formed 552d AWACS Wing, *"I wish you hard work."* Clearly, he didn't wish us luck as is traditional in such cases—he wished hard work, because in hard work, we would make our luck. I too wish you hard work—

the hardest work you'll ever love. You're the commander—get out and lead!

Carry with you the mantra General Creech gave to the Tactical Air Command under his six years of dynamic leadership, in which the dramatic improvements were both legend and real. "Make it Better! Make it Happen! Make it Last!"